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Pristine kipuka boasts tall native plants

By Susan Noh
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CAREY - Fourteen miles east of Carey at the south end of the Craters of the Moon National Monument, three-quarters of a mile across jagged lava rock and rattlesnakes, stands a hill covered with sagebrush and other vegetation.

Livestock have never grazed here. This 180-acre island, or "kipuka," is surrounded by a sea of lava and there is little water in the area.

The vegetation, said Dr. Gerald Wright of the University of Idaho, is a grass and shrub community with some "good native grass stands," consisting of Western wheat grass and Idaho fescue.

The surprise, said Wright, who studied the area in 1988, is that there are more exotic species on the kipuka now than when it was first examined in 1950. He said he found more foreign invaders, such as cheatgrass and this-tle, which are commonly associated with overgrazed and burned areas.

In 1990, Ray Brown of

Ricks College compared the Carey Kipuka and Laidlaw Park. Laidlaw Park is the largest kipuka, 78,000 acres, but it has been grazed by domestic animals for many years. Brown noted several obvious differences between the two areas.

The grazed land, Brown said, "did not appear as lush (as the ungrazed land)." The range grasses were not as tall. He also found sagebrush was much taller inside the Carey Kipuka than in Laidlaw Park.

But he said he found no appreciable difference in plant species between the two areas.

The Carey Kipuka is one of several varying in size from a few acres to many thousand acres. It is the largest undisturbed kipuka.

Its soil is comprised primarily of wind-deposited silt, in addition to a small amount of broken-down lava rock. The soil is underlain by basalt at about 27 to 35 inches.

Wildlife includes field mice, cottontails, marmots, jack rabbits, deer, antelope and rattlesnakes.



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Flowering shrubs, sage brush and native grass dominate Carey Kipuka, a lava-encircled island never grazed by livestock.